

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

1           1.       A method of identifying unwanted messages, the method comprising:  
2           inspecting a payload portion of a message being communicated and identifying  
3           characteristics of the payload portion;  
4           comparing the characteristics of the inspected payload portion of the message with stored  
5           data indicating characteristics of at least one other message that has been inspected; and  
6           identifying a security condition based on the comparison.

1           2.       The method of claim 1 wherein the characteristics of the payload portion  
2           include information other than address information.

1           3.       The method of claim 2 wherein the characteristics of the payload portion do  
2           not include address information.

1           4.       The method of claim 1 wherein the message includes an electronic mail  
2           message.

1           5.       The method of claim 1 further comprising rejecting the message if the security  
2           condition identified includes a hostile indicator.

1           6.       The method of claim 5 wherein the security condition is identified as a hostile  
2           indicator when the comparison of the characteristics reveals a threshold number of messages  
3           having a shared characteristic.

1           7.       The method of claim 6 further comprising removing previously-accepted  
2           messages having characteristics in common with subsequently-exchanged messages for  
3           which the security condition is identified as including the hostile indicator.

1           8.       The method of claim 1 further comprising tracking the characteristics of the  
2           payload portion for comparison against characteristics of future messages, wherein the  
3           characteristics of a new message are compared with the characteristics of at least one  
4           message that has been tracked.

1           9.     The method of claim 7 wherein comparing the characteristics of the payload  
2     portion includes comparing the characteristics of the payload portion of messages inspected  
3     with stored characteristics of other communicated messages.

1           10.    The method of claim 7 wherein a message is tracked when the security  
2     condition is identified as including an indeterminate indicator.

1           11.    The method of claim 10 wherein the indeterminate indicator is identified if the  
2     comparison of the characteristics does not itself reveal a hostile security condition, but the  
3     characteristics of the payload portion would reveal a hostile security condition in  
4     combination with similar characteristics of other messages.

1           12.    The method of claim 10 further comprising accepting the message if the  
2     security condition includes the indeterminate indicator.

1           13.    The method of claim 1 further comprising accepting the message if the  
2     security condition includes a neutral indicator.

1           14.    The method of claim 1 wherein identifying the security condition includes  
2     comparing the characteristics of more than one message received by a single device.

1           15.    The method of claim 1 wherein identifying the security condition includes  
2     comparing the characteristics of more than one message sent by a single device.

1           16.    A method of identifying unwanted messages, the method comprising:  
2     inspecting a message being communicated to a first device in a message exchanging  
3     system that includes two or more devices and identifying characteristics of the message;  
4     comparing the characteristics of the message with stored data indicating  
5     characteristics of at least one other message communicated to a second device in the message  
6     exchanging system; and  
7     identifying a security condition based on the comparison of the message inspected and  
8     the stored data.

1           17     The method of claim 16 wherein identifying the security condition includes  
2     comparing the characteristics of messages received by the more than one different device.

1           18.    The method of claim 16 wherein identifying the security condition includes  
2 comparing the characteristics of messages sent by the more than one different device.

1           19.    The method of claim 16 wherein the characteristics of the messages includes  
2 address information.

1           20.    The method of claim 16 wherein the message includes an electronic mail  
2 message.

1           21.    The method of claim 16 further comprising rejecting the message if the  
2 security condition is identified as including a hostile indicator.

1           22.    The method of claim 21 wherein the security condition is identified as a  
2 hostile indicator when the comparison of the characteristics reveals a threshold number of  
3 messages having a shared characteristic.

1           23.    The method of claim 22 further comprising removing previously-accepted  
2 messages if their characteristics share features with characteristics for subsequently  
3 exchanged messages for which the security condition is identified as including the hostile  
4 indicator.

1           24.    The method of claim 16 further comprising tracking characteristics of the  
2 messages for comparison against characteristics of future messages, wherein the  
3 characteristics of a new message are compared with the characteristics of at least one  
4 message that has been tracked.

1           25.    The method of claim 24 wherein comparing the characteristics of the  
2 messages inspected includes comparing the portion of the message inspected with a data  
3 store having characteristics of other communicated messages.

1           26.    The method of claim 24 wherein a message is tracked when the security  
2 condition is identified as including an indeterminate indicator.

1           27.    The method of claim 26 wherein the indeterminate indicator is identified if the  
2 comparison of the characteristics does not itself reveal a hostile security condition, but the

3 characteristics of the message would reveal a hostile security condition in combination with  
4 similar characteristics of other messages.

1 28. The method of claim 26 further comprising accepting messages when the  
2 indeterminate indicator is identified for the security condition.

1 29. The method of claim 16 further comprising accepting the message if the  
2 security condition includes a neutral indicator.